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Russia, U.S. Press Toward Full Chemical Arms Elimination

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WASHINGTON -- The United States and Russia this week touted progress toward full elimination of their world's-largest stockpiles of chemical warfare materials.

Washington also called on war-wracked Syria to relinquish its widely presumed chemical arsenal, while Moscow remained silent on the matter during the annual conference of member nations to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague, Netherlands.

The United States has spent in excess of \$25 billion to destroy close to 90 percent of an arsenal that once encompassed nearly 30,000 tons of materials such as sarin nerve agent and mustard gas. The remaining stocks are held at Army installations in Colorado and Kentucky, where construction of disposal plants are respectively 97 and 57 percent completed, U.S. Ambassador Robert Mikulak said on Monday.

The Defense Department now expects to destroy roughly 2,600 tons of mustard agent at the Pueblo Chemical Depot in Colorado by 2019, and to complete disposal of 523 tons of blister and nerve agents at the Blue Grass Army Depot in Kentucky in 2023.

Russia as of Sunday had destroyed close to 31,000 tons of chemical agents, 70 percent of its 44,000-ton declared arsenal. It anticipates finishing off 4,438 tons of material this year, 51 tons more than originally planned, G.V. Kalamonov, Russian deputy industry and trade minister, said in his address to the conference.

Both nations have cited economic and logistical challenges that prevented them from meeting their obligation under the Chemical Weapons Convention to wipe out their holdings of banned materials by April of this year. Member nations to the accord last year demurred from penalizing the former Cold War rivals, instead demanding greater transparency and reporting for their demilitarization efforts.

"As all chemical weapons possessors have discovered, destruction of such weapons is a difficult task," Mikulak said in prepared comments to conference delegates. "Over the course of many years, the United States has addressed and resolved safety and environmental concerns raised by local authorities, as well as by people living near our chemical weapons storage and destruction facilities. Complex

technical issues have been mitigated and the lessons learned have been passed on to our other chemical weapons destruction sites."

Mikulak pledged that the U.S. government would "make every effort" to destroy its remaining chemical materials "as rapidly as practicable" without sacrificing safety or endangering the nearby environment and populace.

Kalamanov offered similar assurances, saying Moscow is working to boost the disposal capacities at all remaining demilitarization plants. Russia has pledged to finish work by the end of 2015, a schedule viewed with some skepticism by independent experts.

"We are making every effort to accomplish the task we have been set as quickly as possible," Kalamanov said.

Three-fourths of the total known stocks of chemical warfare agents -- 59,151 of 78,480 tons -- have been eliminated to date, according to figures from the [organization](#), which monitors compliance of 188 member nations to the Chemical Weapons Convention. The intent is to ensure the weapons can never be used in conflict or fall into the hands of terrorists or other rogue actors.

Albania, India and South Korea have all completed disposal of their arsenals. The other two OPCW states with known stocks are Iraq and Libya. Syria is believed to hold hundreds of tons of warfare agents but has not joined the convention.

A small amount of unusable chemical materials and munitions are believed to remain within deteriorating bunkers in [Iraq](#). Baghdad is working with the OPCW Technical Secretariat and member nations on a "final destruction plan," said Ahmad Bamrani, who leads the International Organizations and Cooperation Department for the Iraqi Foreign Ministry. He did not offer details of the plan or a timeline for work to begin and conclude.

[Libya's](#) efforts to destroy its small chemical arsenal were halted in early 2011, almost simultaneous to the beginning of the uprising that ultimately toppled the Qadhafi regime. The stockpile today -- some of which had not been declared by the former government -- consists of roughly 14 tons of sulfur mustard agent in bulk containers, hundreds of artillery shells that also contain the blister agent, and about 882 tons of precursor materials. An OPCW spokesman earlier this year said the nation expected to resume work in 2013 and to complete demilitarization operations in 2016.

No Libyan statement for this week's meeting was immediately available. However, the nation in September said the system for disposal of the bulk mustard holdings was ready for operations once necessary arrangements have been made. Libya has also sought, without "concrete results," to obtain funding for a detonation chamber to destroy the mustard munitions, according to the September statement to the 41-country OPCW Executive Council.

Mikulak said the United States and other OPCW member nations are "concerned about the origins" of the chemical stocks that had not been declared under dictator Muammar Qadhafi. "We look forward to additional information that the Technical Secretariat can gather and provide to the Executive Council

and to this conference that addresses where the hidden chemical weapons, and the chemical agent they contain, were produced."

The U.S. envoy also urged Syria to "give up its chemical weapons arsenal and join the Chemical Weapons Convention, and we will continue to work with the international community toward that end."

The Assad regime in July appeared to acknowledge its possession of biological and chemical weapons, and to threaten to use them against foreign aggressors in Syria's civil war. There is also worry that the chaos in Syria might create an opening for militant organizations to take control of some segment of the chemical stockpile.

"Prudence requires that the international community ... make preparations," Mikulak said. "All states parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention should consider the support and assistance that they could provide to victims or neighboring nations if there is a chemical weapons release or use involving Syria."